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Gunsaulus Collection
of
Browning Memorabilia

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FRANK WAKELEY GUNSAULUS

From portrait painted by Arvid Nyholm, of Chicago, and presented to the University on behalf of the donors by Mr. O. A. Wright at Recognition Chapel, Commencement, 1920. The Browning students and others contributed to the expense of the portrait. The open volume upon which the hand of the sitter rests is a hand-made, hand-illuminated copy of the Declamations of Seneca, written about 1275 A. D. upon purest vellum, and presented to the University by Mr. Wright. It is on exhibition with the Gunsaulus collection of MSS. and early books in the University library.



PRECISELY one hundred and one years after the birth of Robert Browning, and almost fifty years after the death of his wife—that is, during the first week of May, 1913—there occurred by public sale in London the dispersal of their personal relics to the ends of the earth. Chairs, tables, ink-stands, photographs, busts, antiquities from Babylon and Greece,



the books from their library, with the autograph of one or the other on fly-leaf or title-page, their letters and poems in priceless MSS., even the more sacredly intimate tokens like

Mrs. Browning's watch and the still more precious souvenir which accompanied the Sonnet from the Portuguese, beginning:

I never gave a lock of hair away
To a man, Dearest, except this to thee—

all fell under the ruthless hammer of the auctioneer.¹ A melancholy sight for the lovers of him who wrote *One Word More*, and her to whom the burning lines were addressed. For many of the articles were purchased for subsequent barter and sale by "dealers and stealers,"

Who, seeing mere money's worth in their prize,
Will sell it to somebody calm as Zeno
At naked High Art,

and thereby give a new meaning to the lines in which the poet expressed his indignation years ago, when they robbed him of a certain precious little tablet of Giotto's which Michael Angelo himself once had coveted.

The Gunsaulus Collection

Others of these treasures, however, have fallen into more reverent hands; and some of them have been brought to America—very fittingly, since here both the Brownings, Robert in particular, found an earlier and more cordial audience than in England. And among Americans no more sympathetic and loving interpreter can be found than the Rev. Dr. Frank W. Gunsaulus, who from time to time has turned over to his alma mater a rich collection of Browning memorabilia that will be gratefully cherished by the students of Ohio Wesleyan as long as the poetry of the Brownings is read, and will enable the hundred and more who each year elect English six (the Tennyson-Browning course) to come into a more intimate personal relation with them.

¹See Introduction, by Sir Frederick G. Kenyon, to *New Poems by Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 1914.

Most conspicuous of all, the familiar face of the poet himself looks down over the great reading-room of the college library. Painted by Felix Moscheles, who sold it with the consent of the sitter directly to Dr. Gunsaulus, it is probably the last portrait of Robert Browning to be made, showing him as he was during the closing months of his life just before he left England for the final fateful visit to Italy. Here again is seen the masculine eye—almost leonine, the robust figure, the frank open countenance with little mark of old age upon it, except in the whitening of the crisply curling hair and beard, the kindly human smile of the poet to whom “the world was full of vague possibilities of friendship.” And in the cabinet near by, in his own hand-writing, are some verses he made for the artist, to describe his picture *The Isle’s Enchantress*.

Various fields of Robert Browning’s interest are here significantly represented—the Shelleyan influence, for example, by a first edition of *Queen Mab*. This is the poem, though not the identical volume, which he, a boy of sixteen, found one day in a boxful of second-hand books on a street stall, and which at once became for him, as he says, “a key to a new world.” There is also a small copy of *Zastrozzi*; and a beautiful little text, printed in 1826—two years before the adventure alluded to—which contains many of the shorter poems of Shelley that he read with such ravishment one warm night in May in his father’s garden, while the nightingales were singing in the laburnum “heavy with its weight of gold,” and in the high branches of a copper-beech near by. These volumes, to be sure, were never in his hands, but they appropriately find a place in the collection on account of his life-long enthusiasm for the creator of *Alastor* and *Prometheus Unbound*.

Other articles there are of a rare antiquarian interest, which came directly from his home in London—ancient

pieces of pottery from Egypt, Assyria and Greece; a jar from Babylonia, from the pantry of the King's palace, partly melted by the heat of the great conflagration that marked the ravage and destruction of the city. Who shall tell what figures peopled the poet's brain, as his gaze rested upon these fragments of far-off times, what shock of battle reached his ears, shouting and tumult of captains and men-at-arms, and

the great march
Wherein man runs to man to assist him and buttress an arch
Nought can break?



And here, most beautiful of all, is a delicate little head in marble, atilt like a flower on its stalk, now scarred and stained by the yellow clay in which for centuries it lay buried—what visions it must have raised before his eyes,

Four



of Greece, of another Balaustion perhaps who should interpret not a new Alkestis, but it may be a new Agamemnon:

that king,
Treading the purple calmly to his death,
While round him, like the clouds of eve, all dusk
The giant shades of fate, silently flitting,
Pile the dim outline of the coming doom.

A more recent addition to the collection is a set of four, oaken chairs and a settee, upholstered in crimson velvet with broad bands of gold braid—Italian in style—which the poet's son remembered as once having been part of the furniture of his early home in Florence. It is pleasant to dream dreams about them; to think of them as they stood in Casa Guidi with the old tapestries and satin from cardinals' bedsteads that had been picked up here and there in the dusty shops, the bookcase with the carved faces of angels and demons that a neighboring convent yielded, and the cream-colored slab of agate

'Neath the twin cherubs in the tarnished frame
O' the mirror,

on which Browning leaned that hot night as he read and read again the little yellow book that gave him the story of Pompilia, and in imagination the whole grim tragedy played itself out in Rome and Arezzo. Perhaps, although they do not appear in the picture Browning had made after Mrs. Browning's death, their place was in the big drawing-room that opened out upon the terrace and looked toward the old gray church of Santa Felice across the way. Her room this was, of which he said there was not an inch without a memory for him; here she always sat, working by the little table, or reading, or talking to her visitors, while the old pictures of the saints looked down sadly from their carved black frames—pictures that he had discovered in obscure and out-of-the-way

places and described in association with the names of Cimabue, Giotto and Ghirlandaio in Old Pictures in Florence. How their crimson and gold must have brightened the dark shadows of the dim chamber, and caught up the subdued lights against the brown background of the hangings on the walls! Was it from one of them, one wonders, that her husband watched her sit

Reading by fire-light, that great brow
And the spirit-small hand propping it,

when each answered the other's unspoken thought by the fine tact of their love? And when friends dropped in of an evening, what a revel of talk and laughter there must have been, over the hot chestnuts and mulled wine, he always loud and vivacious, pouring out a torrent of bubbling speech, his talk "assuming the volume and tumult of a cascade," and she speaking rarely in a gentle voice that "often fluttered over her words like the flame of a dying candle over the wick." Perhaps in these very chairs Mary Boyle has sat, who counted four poets among her intimate circle, and Hawthorne, and the two young American sculptors—Powers and Story—and that other young American, George William Curtis, then fresh from Brook Farm, where, it is said, even "the weeds were scratched out of the ground to the music of Tennyson and Browning." And it may well be that on the broad seat of one of them Walter Savage Landor found repose, when, past eighty, after a violent quarrel with his family, he appeared alone at Casa Guidi, homeless and ill, with nothing but the clothes he wore and a few pence in one of his pockets. At all events, the Brownings sheltered and befriended him; and in gratitude he gave them on a wedding anniversary a Berlin Trembleuse cup and saucer, made expressly for them, which is now also a part of the collection.

The Books of the Brownings

And some of their books are here, too; books they lovingly handled together, enriched with penciled notations that show the range of her scholarship and the depth of her critical insight. Here is a Sophocles in two volumes, and a sumptuous Plato in eleven. Both seem to have belonged to her before her marriage, although in



nearly every volume of the Plato she has inscribed with wifely pride, in her tiny hand, "Roberti et Elizabethae B. Barrett Browning," adding *ex libris* in one or two. Greek was a life-long passion with them both, as it was one of their earliest points of sympathy—Greek and poetry! "I love your verses with all my heart," he writes impetuously at the beginning of their correspondence; and she, in the first of her letters in which his name appears, observes that "Mr. Browning is said to be learned in Greek, especially the dramatists." As for her, it is told that when she fell ill, she had her Greek books bound to look like novels, for fear that her physician should forbid her use of them. The Plato at least, though in the orig-

inal binding, seems to have been often in her hands during the three years of her sojourn on the Devon coast, where she hoped the warmer climate might aid in restoring her health; for we find, according to her own notation, that she had read the *Theaetetus* by December 23, 1838, the *Parmenides* by the first of January following, and *Beta of the Laws*—over the title of which she has written, “ ’Tis good to be merry and wise”—at Torquay by the fifteenth of February, 1840. The *Symposium*, of which she left a page of her translation in writing between the leaves of the book, she finds “highly dramatic, . . . the whole composition remarkable for passages, deep-toned and imaginative. The passage referring to the chief beauty” she thinks “one of the very noblest in Plato.” But the death of her best beloved brother, who was drowned in Babbacombe Bay on a day of the next July, broke the continuity of her studies, and there is no further record in the volumes to show when she resumed her readings, or the order in which she pursued them. It is not unlikely, however, that when she plunged again into “work, work, work,” as her only solace, she may have found consolation in the noble words of Socrates on death and immortality, and have read them in the days of her deepest sorrow, with a new sense of their meaning. Thus endeared to her, one thinks these volumes must surely have been among the treasures, the old favorites, for which the two sent to London when they had established themselves in Casa Guidi, and were eager to fill the empty shelves of the convent book case. And when the books finally came, is it an altogether idle fancy that one of them may have lain on the poet’s knee that evening, when, as he pondered over its pages, he prophetically dreamed that one day in life’s November it should put

Such a branch-work forth as soon extends
To a vista opening far and wide,

that slopes at last to Italy and youth and happy retrospects?

Two very interesting additions have more recently been made to the collection. One is another of Mrs. Browning's books, a superb text in Greek and Latin of



De Sublimis bearing the name of Dionysius Longinus, with many marginal notes in her own hand, and on the back of the frontispiece her critical estimate of the work signed with her initials. "I am doubting whether to call him the poet or the philosopher of criticism," she re-

marks,—a judgment that later authorities confirm. The other is a duodecimo in old calf, *La Libreria del Doni Fiorentino*, an anthology of Florentine literature in two volumes bound together and dated respectively 1580 and 1551. This belonged to Robert Browning and testifies to his interest in rare old books. On the fly-leaf in his own hand is written, "This work is so scarce that I have seen the first part only marked in a catalogue one guinea."

And there is the beautiful bronze bust of Pompilia, the conception and handiwork of the artist son of the two poets, which stood for many years in the house in London, cherished and admired by the author of *The Ring and the Book*. But it is not the Pompilia of the poem: the full half-open lips, the softly rounded cheeks, the sensuous chin, the heavy mass of hair flowing down over the low forehead, these are not the features of that lady, "young, tall, beautiful, sad and strange" as Caponsacchi saw her on that eventful night at the theatre, the woman "with the great, grave, griefful air" who appeared to him in the twilight with lamp in hand, framed in the black square of the window and asked him to take her to Rome.

Her brow had not the right line, leaned too much,
Painters would say; they like the straight-up Greek:
This seemed bent somewhat with an invisible crown
Of martyr and saint, not such as art approves.
And how the dark orbs dwelt deep underneath,
Looked out of such a sad sweet heaven on me—
The lips compressed a little, came forward too,
Careful for a whole world of sin and pain.

No, it is not the Pompilia of the poem; but it is very beautiful nevertheless and very precious in its associations!

There are other relics here that cannot even be enumerated; first editions of the Browning poetry, books of criticism and personalia, and a few autograph letters. Of the latter, one reproduced in fac simile in Dr. Gunsaulus's own delightful volume, *Higher Ministrations of Recent*

English Poetry, is a note of condolence written by Browning in 1864, which strikes the same vibrant chord of courage and faith he had struck three years before in *Prospice*, in the midst of his own great sorrow: "We all believe, I know, that in a short time we shall be together again, and that this life would be poor indeed but for this hope." Another was written in 1853, by George Frederic Watts to his "dear master and teacher." And the last, even more significant, was written from The Priory in May, 1869, by the hand of George Eliot herself. "I saw a private letter from a very young woman," she says, "whose words are all alive with sincere meaning. In this letter she has occasion to refer to 'the works of the poet from whom I have sucked most life—Robert Browning.' I venture to tell you this precisely because it was not intended for your eyes and ears." "The poet from whom I have sucked most life—Robert Browning"—there is the common verdict which thousands of young men and women, both in his own time and ours, have found inscribed on their hearts!

W. E. S.

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